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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

PUBLIC BUILDINGS AND GROUNDS, EXPENDITURES, &c.

ANNUAL REPORT

OF THE

COMMISSIONER OF PUBLIC BUILDINGS.

JANUARY 12, 1848.

Read, and referred to the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds.

OFFICE OF COMMISSIONER OF PUBLIC BUILDINGS,
October 11, 1848.

SIR : In compliance with the act of Congress, requiring the Commissioner of Public Buildings "to make to Congress, annually, at the commencement of the year, a report of the manner in which all appropriations for the public buildings and grounds have been applied," I have the honor to report :

That the expenditures on the public buildings and grounds and other objects committed to my charge, as appears from the books in this office, from the 14th of January, 1847, (the date of last report) to the 15th March, 1847, (the time my predecessor's term of office expired,) have been as follows :

For annual repairs of the capitol, &c.....	\$1,259 61
For annual repairs of the President's house, &c.....	493 43
For compensation to four assistants, &c.....	354 00
For compensation, &c., to the auxiliary guard.....	1,116 68
For improved iron water posts on Pennsylvania avenue	510 06

In compliance with the said act, I further respectfully beg leave to report, that from the date of my appointment (15th March, 1847, to the present date, the expenditures on the public buildings and grounds and other objects committed to my charge, have been as follows :

For annual repairs of the capitol, &c.....	\$8,054 22
For annual repairs of the President's house, &c.....	2,692 10
For compensation to four assistants at Potomac bridge, &c.	2,973 07
For compensation, &c., to the auxiliary guard.....	5,674 50
For improved iron water-posts on Pennsylvania avenue.	103 37
For repairs of Potomac bridge.....	2,197 25
For lighting Pennsylvania avenue, &c.	68 85

The great injury done to the Potomac bridge by a high freshet, in November, eighteen hundred and forty-six, which broke and carried away a large portion of it, is repaired, and the bridge has been thrown open for travellers since early in August last.

Most of the timbers of the broken part of the bridge, and also the sides of the drawbridge, were saved by the timely and well-directed exertions of persons employed for that purpose, by my immediate predecessor. These materials, with others, belonging to the government, have been used in constructing the new part of the bridge, and have answered a valuable purpose.

A new pier, constructed in a substantial manner, with durable materials, and filled with stone, encloses a submerged pier, which was undermined by the rapid current of the river during the before-named freshet, and fell, carrying with it one hundred and fifty-six feet of the main, or high bridge, and the north half of the drawbridge. As the new pier rests upon eighty piles firmly driven into the bottom of the river, with a powerful machine, it is reasonable to conclude, as it is strongly fastened to those piles, that it will successfully resist, for several years, the destructive effects of freshets, drift and ice, provided such alterations and improvements are made in the present construction of the Potomac bridge as will prevent the accumulation of drift and ice against its up-stream side, and will diminish the present rapidity of the current, when the river is high.

Some time before the recent repairs upon the bridge were finished, being convinced that the twenty-two hundred dollars, appropriated by the last Congress for this purpose, would not complete the work, if done in a proper manner, I deemed it prudent, in view of this fact, to obtain, if possible, additional funds from the corporation of Washington. Application was accordingly made by me to that body for twelve hundred dollars, which sum it promptly furnished upon its own responsibility, but with the expectation that Congress would reimburse the corporation for its timely and efficient aid. Doubtless, this reasonable expectation will be realized, and the money refunded.

Here it may be proper to state, that the old part of the Potomac bridge is so much decayed, at this time, as to require extensive repairs, in order to protect it from the destructive effects of freshets, and to enable it to sustain with safety the travel upon it.

The trestle portion of the bridge above high-water mark is not only rotten, but is also so much strained and otherwise injured by the heavy pressure of drift against it, from time to time, as seri-

ously to endanger its stability when the waters of the river are high and its current necessarily rapid.

It is, however, a pleasing fact, worthy of notice, that the Potomac bridge, notwithstanding its decayed and weak condition, resisted more successfully than could reasonably have been expected the injurious effects of the great freshet early in October last. Aside from the damage done to a portion of the trestle structure by a very heavy pressure of drift against it, which has since been repaired, all other parts of the bridge have withstood not only the crushing effects of this pressure, but, also, the race-horse rapidity of the current. Even the old piers, though much weakened by the effects of time and hard service, still occupy their original position, and sustain their massive superstructure. Could they receive that timely aid, in the shape of judicious repairs upon them, which they unquestionably deserve, doubtless they would continue to do good service for several years, provided some plan is promptly devised and carried into effect that will permit the waters of the river, when high, to flow onward more uninterruptedly than they do at present.

In connexion with this subject, I take leave to say a few words in relation to the present construction of the trestle and causeway portions of the Potomac bridge, and its injurious effects upon the northern channel of the river, which is certainly narrowing and gradually filling up. If the declarations of aged and intelligent persons are worthy of credence about this matter, the time is not distant when the northern channel was but little, if at all, inferior to the southern. What, then, has produced the present injurious change? Evidently the peculiar construction of the Potomac bridge, and nothing else. Its causeway portion, which is nineteen hundred and sixty-one feet in length, completely obstructs, for this long distance, the natural course of the river. This causeway is connected with the north side of the river by a trestle bridge, seven hundred and five feet long, exclusive of the opening for the drawbridge, which measures sixty-six feet, and with the main or high bridge, by a similar structure, eleven hundred and eighty-two feet long. The trestles are only twenty-four feet apart in the clear. These openings being too narrow for the drift to pass through them, when the river is high, they necessarily become so completely obstructed as to resist its current almost as effectually as the causeway itself. The consequence is, that the river is most obstructed above the bridge when its waters are the highest, and they can, therefore, find no other outlet than that under the main or high bridge, and through the north opening at the drawbridge. As this outlet for the waters of a river four thousand seven hundred and ninety-seven feet wide to pass through in times of freshets, does not exceed in width seven hundred and forty-nine feet, it is not at all surprising that they rush through it with the utmost velocity, or that the river, at such times, is two or three feet higher immediately above the bridge than it is below it. Nor is it strange that, at such times, piers and trestles are undermined, broken, and washed away. The wonder is, that they resist as well as they do

the immense pressure against them, or even sustain their positions at all under such unfavorable circumstances. Nor is it to be wondered at that, in times of freshet, all that part of Washington, near the canal, should be inundated, the lower part of the dwellings of the inhabitants filled with water, the business operations of such citizens as are located on its margin suspended, their property seriously injured or destroyed, and the canal subjected to much lamage. It cannot, in the nature of things, be otherwise, while the present obstructions to the natural course of the river are permitted to continue.

Great, however, as are the evils already produced by the unfortunate construction of the Potomac bridge, they are unquestionably of minor importance when compared with others produced by the same cause. An extensive mud flat has already been formed opposite to the causeway and trestle bridge by deposits from the obstructed waters of the river. This flat is now bared at low tide, and will, ere long, be elevated above high-water mark, unless some plan be speedily devised and carried into effect that will stop its upward progress. Should, however, nothing be done to prevent this result, and should this elevation be reached and the flat become an island covered with vegetation, then will the consequences be far more disastrous to the inhabitants of Washington than inundations or the destruction of the northern channel. Miasmatic exhalations will be so much increased in quantity and in their deleterious qualities, during the summer and autumnal months, by this island formation, as to be productive of bilious diseases of such frequency, and of a highly malignant character, as will deeply injure, if not destroy, the present well merited reputation of Washington for the purity of its atmosphere, and the healthiness of its location.

In view of these evils, and believing that they could be prevented by widening the waterways under the trestle portion of the Potomac bridge, and opening others through the causeway, so that the waters of the river, when high, would meet with no obstructions at the bridge, I most respectfully recommend this object to the favorable consideration of Congress.

The causeway portion of the Potomac bridge has also been repaired, and the plank footway upon its down-stream side, which was very much decayed, has been removed, and a gravelled footway made upon it up-stream side, with improved brick culverts passing under it, for the purpose of conducting the water off from the road into the river.

As the unimproved public grounds, near to the capitol and President's house, are unquestionably in a very bad condition at this time, they will, doubtless, receive the favorable attention and action of Congress.

At the north and south of the capitol, and, also, at its west front, they are deeply gullied, and a portion of their surface is covered with unsightly rubbish, which is exceedingly unpleasant to persons residing near them.

It is also a fact, worthy of notice, that the public grounds upon the margin of Tiber creek are in a delapsing state, and are rapidly

being washed away by the action of that stream upon them. To prevent, in some measure, their destruction, and also to give additional strength to the abutments at the south end of the Tiber creek bridge, under the Pennsylvania avenue, which were much injured by the freshet in eighteen hundred and forty-six, I deemed it necessary, when those abutments were being repaired, to have constructed on each side of the creek a wall adjoining them, extending down the creek about sixty feet, and elevated to a level with the adjacent grounds. But, notwithstanding the apparent strength and durability of these walls, which were built of stone in a firm and workmanlike manner, they were, nevertheless, thrown down by the action of the waters of that stream upon them during the flood in October last, and not less than ten feet of the earth immediately behind them was washed away.

Nor are the unimproved public grounds at the south front of the President's house in a better condition than those near the capitol. Like them, they are deeply gullied, and much of their surface is covered with unsightly and filthy rubbish.

In view of these facts, it is respectfully suggested that these grounds be graded and enclosed with neat and substantial wooden fences, and planted with suitable trees of a rapid growth, which, in a few years, will be not only ornamental to the public buildings, but, also, highly conducive to the comfort and health of the citizens of Washington.

For the last ten years the annual appropriations made by Congress for the purchase of trees have averaged three hundred dollars. As this expenditure could, doubtless, be prevented by cultivating upon the public grounds, a nursery of such trees as may be required for the wants of the government, the propriety of planting such a nursery is respectfully suggested.

Judging from the present favorable condition and neat appearance of the improved public grounds at the capitol and President's house, it affords me much pleasure to state, that appropriations for them, larger than were made by the last Congress, will not be required.

The capitol and President's house have received some necessary repairs, mostly upon their roofs, to prevent them from leaking. I regret, however, to state that the copper covering upon the roof of the great dome of the capitol is in such a condition, at this time, as to require extensive repairs, in order to prevent the frame work of the dome and its interior finish from being injured by leakage during heavy rains.

The public spring on the farm of Mr. John A. Smith has received due attention, and such alterations and improvements have been made in the structure that encloses and covers it as will hereafter prevent evil minded persons, if so disposed, from injuring the water, an object of much importance. It has also been thoroughly cleansed and protected from inundation by an embankment of earth around the improved structure, sufficiently elevated for the purposes intended, and neatly covered with turf.

The water-pipes extending from the spring to the capitol, and

from thence along the Pennsylvania avenue to the treasury building, have received such repairs as were deemed necessary, and are at present in good order.

Also the public spring at the fountain square has been protected from injury by a suitable covering, and the pipes which convey its waters to the President's house, and to some of the public offices, have been examined and repaired.

Fifty-four of the public lots have been sold during the past year, for the sum of two thousand two hundred and sixty-four dollars and seventy-three cents.

The number of lots assigned to the United States, in the original division, was ten thousand two hundred and forty-three, and which have been disposed of in the manner following, viz:

There were sold by the first board of commissioners.....	6,227
Do the second board of commissioners.....	184
Do Thos. Munroe, (superintendent).....	238
Do Sam. Lane, (commissioner).....	69
Do Jos. Elgar, (commissioner).....	213
Do William Noland, (commissioner).....	627
Do Andrew Beaumont, (commissioner).....	9
Do Charles Douglas, (commissioner).....	45
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	7,612

There have also been given to the following institutions the following lots, to wit:

To the "Orphans' Asylum"...	29	lots, valued at \$10,000
To the "Sisters of Charity"...	70	do 10,000
To the "Columbian College"...	182	do 25,000
To the "Georgetown College"...	490	do 25,000

771

Total.....	8,383
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Leaving unsold eighteen hundred and sixty lots.

The present balance on hand, on account of this fund, is three hundred and twenty-seven dollars and thirty-eight cents, whilst the outstanding accounts, against this fund, at this time, are certainly not less than two thousand five hundred dollars.

As the fund created by the sale of city lots, and made available by an act of Congress, approved May 15th, 1820, for the purposes therein expressed, is no longer adequate to the accomplishment of those purposes, owing to the very limited sale of lots for some years past, propriety seems to dictate that some other mode be adopted for the attainment of that end.

Being convinced, after obtaining the opinions of practical men of much experience on the subject, that the appropriations made by the last Congress, "for the repairs of the western front of the capitol, to prevent the cracking of the wall over the windows in the basement story," and also "for enlarging watch-box at the northwestern gate of the capitol," were insufficient for the com-

pletion of these works, if done in a proper manner, I deem it most prudent to delay their commencement until more ample means could be obtained for their prosecution and completion.

Estimates for the public buildings and grounds will be laid before the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, as required by the act of Congress.

CHARLES DOUGLAS,
Commissioner of Public Buildings.

